

November 2014

Does Darkness Win?

Christ, no stranger to desperation, rushes to embrace those who commit Suicide

It happened in a country place. A local teenager had committed suicide. I was summoned to the scene immediately. It was a timeless moment I shall never forget. In the unearthly light of a pale moon rising into the October sky, the field seemed empty. The 4ft 6ins body of Brian was lying in the grass, a 3ft 6ins rifle by his side. A cow was licking his face. I could hear the unbearable screams of anguish from the house beyond the gate.

Some years later I befriended Michael, a young postman, who had struggled with depression for a long time. We used to have great chats. I loved his company. On his rounds, one grey and silent morning, he parked his van, and walked heavily, through the long rushes, into a lonely lake.



Memories of those dreadful moments came back to me with alarming clarity when I visited a friend last week. His wife had committed suicide more than a year ago. He is still struggling to cope. He knows it will take a long time. It is for him, for the parents of Brian and Michael, and for the millions whose lives have been touched by suicide, that I offer these reflections as we approach November, that mysterious month of memories that both bless and disturb our souls.

On a 'good' day I cannot grasp how any kind of pressure could be intense enough to drive someone to seriously think about suicide. And on another personally dark day of quiet desperation, I can. You may remember a while back the collapse of the Enron empire. Not long afterwards a top executive killed himself. Why would this man end his life while many others, in even far more disgraceful or disastrous circumstances, would manage to continue on and survive? Probably because they would unmask and recognise their shame and self-blame; they would search, in spite of their desolation and fear, for a truer perspective on the whole issue; they would try to weigh up the

longterm consequences, and painfully find a new way forward – a way that might eventually be more fulfilling than anything they had lost.

My own suggestion is that without being held, in love, in some sense or another, this slow climb back into the light is impossible. People's inner reaction to tragedy varies so much. In the soul of that Enron leader, perhaps the identity of success, power and human respect was stronger than the identity of his own humanity as husband, father, community member, son of God? All of this is very unsure ground on which to be speculating about the inner worlds of a person's soul – that fragile, fearful place – so strong on a Sunday, so anxious on a Monday.



There is something about the news of a suicide that cuts across everything we are doing or thinking. It has a chilling ring to it. We are stopped in our tracks. Everything else becomes unimportant. With deep gut reaction, we know that there is something ultimate here. There is no pretence in the minds of those who take their own lives. Somewhere in all of us, a silent shiver of fear begins. Most letters received by counselling services concern this phenomenon. Either intimately, or at a distance, almost all of us are personally acquainted with the shock of suicide.

You may remember the tragedy when Dr David Kelly took his own life. He felt caught in a tangle that made it impossible for him to live any more. By all accounts he was strong and gentle, a good man, a true friend, a father and husband. And something snapped. The strain, the pain, the unbearable pressure were all too much. Before he died, the scientist referred to those 'dark players in a deadly game'.

Closer to home, any one of us is liable to be seduced into the power games of dark players in our own community, in our own family, in our own mind. And I'm always surprised at the number of my own acquaintances who are prepared to admit that, maybe even briefly and superficially, they have, at some stage in their lives, considered the possibility of ending it all. There is so much mystery about the inner

state of those hearts and minds that cannot go on with the journey of life. It is foolish to pass judgement too soon. Grace is everywhere. Some years back we read another suicide story about a man who was referred to as an agent of evil. In The Independent Paul Vallely wrote, 'Harold Shipman's suicide raises an intriguing question. Was the fact that he took his own life evidence that even a man like him was capable of a transforming journey?'



With all its profound complexities, the propensity for suicide is, in most cases, an illness. We are made up of body and soul; either can snap. Fr Ronald Rolheiser, whose sensitive understanding of this phenomenon I incorporate in this article, wrote, *'We can die of cancer, high blood pressure, heart attacks, aneurysms. These are physical sicknesses. But we can suffer those, too, in the soul. There are malignancies and aneurysms also of the heart – mortal wounds from which the soul cannot recover.'*

When a person commits suicide it is always a tragedy, but not always an act of despair. The death is not freely chosen, but is a desperate attempt to end unendurable pain. And there is no reason for the deep guilt and self-blame that sometimes haunts the lives of those who are left behind. We often torment ourselves by regretting not being there when the tragedy happened. But we were not there for the very reason that the person did not wish us to be there. He or she chose the time and place precisely with our absence in mind. That is part of the anatomy of the disease of suicide. And, this side of heaven, sometimes all the outstretched hands and professional help in the world cannot reach a heart paralysed by fear and illness.

Our wounded loved ones, who fall victim to suicide, are safe in God's huge heart – safer by far than at the hands of those of us who, in our ignorance, tend to judge and condemn. The Christian response to suicide should not be horror, or fear for the person's salvation. Suicide victims are met by a gentle Christ who, with a compassionate embrace, restores peace to their troubled hearts. Neither should we be anxious, or forever accusing ourselves, about what we did, or did not do, or whether, if we had paid enough careful attention, we could have prevented the tragedy.

Such understandable but self-defeating introspection brings no healing. What friends can do is gently hold the grieving ones, share their helplessness, avoid explaining, carefully harvest the bits and pieces of today's hope to make tomorrow's living a possibility. They can encourage the person to talk, be prepared to listen and place some reasons for living into an empty-looking future.

Suicide is, indeed, a desperate way to die, but we must understand it for what it is, a sickness of the soul. And the God who redeems all manner of failures and mistakes, who brings new light into even the deepest darkness, will restore eternal hope and courage to those frightened hearts who leave this life too early. **Yes, Christ, no stranger to desperation, rushes to embrace those who commit suicide**

